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IJMASRI, Vol. 1, issue 1, pp. 172- 178, Oct. -2023
<https://doi.org/10.53633/ijmasri>

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY
ADVANCED SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
(IJMASRI)**

ISSN: 2582-9130

IBI IMPACT FACTOR 1.5

DOI: 10.53633/IJMASRI

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE MINOR FORT MONUMENTS IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

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Abstract

Kanyakumari is a beautiful, quaint district in South India. Presenting several tourist destinations, places of worship, historical monuments and much more; this locale is far more than just a vacationer's destination. This is indeed a place to remember; an authentic historical experience, to understand and treasure for a long time to come. Kanyakumari district is located in the southernmost tip of Tamil Nadu. Also popularly known as Cape Comorin; the district borders with Tirunelveli, the Gulf of Manaer, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala. Densely populated and urbanized, this city comes a close second to the metropolis of Chennai. This is also the richest district in terms of income, literacy and education. Kanyakumari features a varied topography, with seas on three sides and mountains bordering the north. Including a multi-religious population comprising Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains, this region features a variety of art, cultures, traditions and schools of philosophical thought. Many kingdoms like Ayi, Cheran, Pandyan, Chola and Venad, ruled Kanyakumari District. Many of the forts, palaces and historical monuments were constructed under the sands of time. But a few still stand to tell the old stories. This paper highlights some of the minor fort monuments in Kanyakumari District.

Keywords: Chieftain, Monuments, Kottai, Arat festival, Ambassadors

Introduction

The four southern most Taluks, Thovalai, Agastheeswaram, Kalkulam and Vilavancode once named as South Travancore constitute the present Kanyakumari district. Many minor forts built by the

Chieftains and invaders. They are Venkalarayan kottai, Udayagiri Fort, Mayyakottai, Marunthu Kottai, Colachel fort, Uthachy kottai and Eraniel fort. Fort is one of the mankind's oldest arts, undoubtedly first used for protection against predatory animals. The defender

is protected by the fortifications and the aggressor is delayed and his impetus is minimized.

Venkalarayan kottai

Usually forts were built those days by kings to protect an important centre especially the capital. Almost all the forts barring Venkalarayan fort were built by the Kings of Travancore. In the early years of the Christian era forts were built of mud. Later on the mud forts were converted into forts stones with bastions. But the Venkalarayan fort alone has certain special peculiarities. First of all the fort alone has certain special peculiarities. First of all the fort was built by a local chieftain. Secondly the fort was neither built of mud nor of stone. It was built of bronze¹. In Tamil language the metal bronze is equalized with the word, 'Venkalam'. Hence the fort was known as Venkalarayan fort. Rayan stands for the local chief. Thus the fort stands segregated from the other forts of Kanyakumari.

Origin of the Fort

Venkalarayan was a local chief who was highly applauded of his strength and valour. He was born to Thanga Ponnamma and Veera Chola Nadar. The ancestors of Venkalarayan served under the Chola Empire. On one occasion there was a breach in the Cauvery River. It was necessitated by the Chola officers that all the people should join together to put an end to the breach. They were asked to carry soil and mud in baskets on their heads. The ancestors of Venkalarayan opposed this move of the Chola officers and left Tanjore and migrated towards Nanjil Nadu and settled at Swamikattuvilai near Manakudy which was Nanjil Nadu.

Gradually they became rich. Venkalarayan married Medaimelazhagi and had four children, two males and two females. They were Chinna Thambi, Salathambi, Thiraimughathazhagi and Sangumughathalagi. Venkalarayan crossed many place and finally selected Samikattuvilai near Manakudy for his settlement². Venkalarayan thought that Samikattuvilai was the best place for the construction of a fort for the protection of his group.

He built a fort there and named it, 'Venkalakottai'. Venkalarayan built a palace also inside the fort. The palace was decorated with paintings of mural and had strong edifices such as towers and arches. He had a treasury inside the fort and a granary to store paddy. The fort was constructed of stones having four entrances facing the four sides, East, West, North and South. The specialty of the gates was that the doors of the gates were made up of bronze. When the doors were closed the doors produced a resonant sound which could be heard by the people who were living the precincts of five miles radius. Whenever there was any invasion the people of the surrounding villages, Parakkai, Kannarodai, Oothukuli and Sasthankoil took asylum within the fort. As the four gates of the fort were made of bronze it was very difficult for the invaders to break open the gates. Thus Venkalarayan fort was impregnable. Inside the fort there is a temple for Venkalarayan. People of this area even today conduct regular prayer. Samikkattuvilai fort or the Venkalarayan fort was 23 km south-east of Padmanabhapuram fort and capital where the Travancore king used to stay. Venkalarayan became powerful who he had an impregnable fort began to defy the Travancore king. He had even gone to the extent of refusing tribute to the Travancore King.

Destruction of the Fort

Rama Varma was the King of Travancore at this time. During his period he had to confront problems posed by the invaders especially the Nawabs of the Karnataka. So he wanted that there should be full cooperation from the chieftains of Travancore. When he realized that Venkalarayan refused to pay tribute to the Travancore Kingdom he was infuriated at the very behavior of Venkalarayan. So he dispatched the Travancore army against Venkalarayan³. The Travancore army encircled the fort. The gates of the Venkalarayan fort were closed. Venkalarayan was confident of the fact that the doors of the fort were impregnable. But the Travancore army demolished the entire fort and all the inhabitants who refused to obey the Travancore king were driven out beyond the Aramboly fort to the eastern side. The remnants of the fort can be seen even today in Samikattuvilai. Since then the fort has lost its splendor and glory. Regarding the destruction of the fort there is an anecdote still

prevails in the area. There is a village, Parakkai, near the Venkalarayan fort. This village is five kilometers away from Samikkattuvilai. Parakkai has an important temple known as Mathusoothanaperumal temple dedicated to Lord Siva. Every year a special celebration known as ‘Arat’ was observed in this temple. Arat literally means taking bath in a river. The purpose of Arat is purifying oneself by taking bath in a river and worshipping the concerned deity. It taken place at the conclusion of Brahmotsavam, the most important annual festival in every temple in South India⁴. Twice a year in March and in October this festival in conducted. In this ceremonial bath both the ruler and the ruled rejoiced.

Thiraimughathalagi, the daughter of Venkalarayan was particular to observe the Arat festival. Venkalarayan was unwilling to give permission to this daughter. Chinnathambi, her brother also advised her to abstain from parking in the Arat festival. But Thirumughathalagi was very adamant in seeing the festival. So she went to Parakkai to observe the Arat festival at Mathosoothanaperumal Temple. Rama Varma (1758-1798) the ruler of Travancore also came to Parakkai. He was attracted by the beauty of Thirumughathalagi. So he sent marriage proposal to Venkalarayan. But Venkalarayan refused on the ground that if the marriage is celebrated then it would affect Velangayar identity of Venkalarayan. So he refused to give his daughter in marriage to Rama Varma. Hence the king attacked the fort.

Venkalarayan felt sorry for the death of his daughter and he did not like to stay in Swamikkattattuvilai. He left Nanjil Nadu which is facing and migrated to Kurumboor after lighting a lamp inside the fort. As a mark of respect the people of this area have built a temple for Venkalarayan and his daughter Thirumughathalagi⁵. Still the temple can be seen in the dilapidated fort area. After this the fort has lost its importance. Thus there prevails the opinion regarding the destruction of the Venkalarayan fort existed in Samikkattuvilai. Though the fort was a short lived one it silently speaks out the past glory of the heroic achievements of Venkalarayan.

Udayagiri fort

Udayagiri fort is situated on the main southern road 16 kilometers North-East of Nagercoil, the capital of the present Kanyakumari district and thirty three miles South-East of Trivandrum, the capital of the Kerala State⁶. The fort is 3 kilometers away from Padmanabhapuram fort towards the south eastern side.

Origin of the fort

Udayagiri was a great military ground of the Cheras. The word Udayagiri is a combination of two words, Udaya and giri. Udaya stands for “East” and giri stands for mountain. It denotes that Udayagiri is the eastern mountain from behind which the sun rises. Udayagiri was the principal arsenal of the Travancore government with a fine foundry, the only one it is believed in use in India for casting iron guns.

In the early period during the 8th century there existed a mud fort in Udayagiri. The origin of the mud fort is shrouded in mystery. During the tenth century Travancore familiarity known as Venadu was ruled by Baskara Ravi Varma. Baskara Ravi Varma imprisoned one of the Chola ambassadors and kept him as a prisoner in the mud fort that existed at Udayagiri. Chola emperor, Raja Raja infuriated at the behavior of Bhaskara Ravi Varma attacked Travancore, captured many place in Nanjil Nadu including Kanyakumari and reached the old mud fort at Udayagiri⁷. The fort was encircled by the Chola army and the fort was burnt. In Muvarula also Ottakuttar mentions about the attack of Travancore by Raja Raja. Kalingathuparani mentions the burning of Udayagiri and it describes that Raja Raja was seated upon an elephant like the rising sun upon the summit of Udayagiri. This Udayagiri fort was called “Makotai” by A.Sreedhara Menon and he explains that Raja Raja burnt the fort and its surrounding areas. The Thirukovilur inscription substantiates the storming of Udayagiri fort by Raja Raja I. the places in and around Udayagiri was named Puliyoorkurichi, after the ‘Chola emblem’. Puli stands for tiger, “yur” stands for the movement of the riger. Kurichi stands for the place. Altogether it denotes that Tiger being the emblem of the Cholas had suzerainty once this area and hence this area even today is known as Puliyoorkurichy.

The old Udayagiri fort is known as 'Makotai'. This fort regained its strength in 1600 during the period of Vira Ravi Varma (1565-1609) of Travancore. The construction on new edifice replacing the mud was first planned and the work was started in 776 M.E. (1601 A.D.). Vira Ravi Varma issued orders for the reconstruction of the fort⁸. The orders of Travancore King were known as "Nittus". Special Nittus or orders of the king are forced among the Mudaliar manuscripts kept in Trivandrum archives. The people of Nanjil Nadu also contributed a lot of money for the construction of the fort. They paid contributions for the digging of moats around the fort.

De Lannoy and Udayagiri Fort

De Lannoy was born in January 1715 in Holland. He came to India as a Captain of the Dutch regiments when the Dutch head a sort of supremacy in the Malabar Coast. The Dutch tried to establish a permanent footing along the Malabar Coast. So they interfered in the internal feuds in Travancore. But the King of Travancore, Marthanda Varma defeated the Dutch in the battle of Colachel on 31 July 1741. The Travancore army captured 389 muskets, cannons and swords. He imprisoned 24 Europeans and several native Christians. They were put in the old fort at Puliyoorkurichi⁹.

Among them De Lannoy attracted the attention of Marthanda Varma. Marthanda Varma fully stratified with the strategic techniques and valour of De Lannoy appointed him as the commander of the Travancore army. De Lannoy served the king faithfully which resulted in the wide territorial expansion of the State. He was entrusted with the task of organizing the Travancore army. He was also appointed to inspect every garrison and outpost. De Lannoy repaired old forts. The important one was the fort at Puliyoorkurichi. The fort at Udayagiri was built under his personal supervision and there he established a foundry for the manufacture of guns. Mortars, cannon balls and gun power.

Maharaja Rama Varma (1758-1798) the successor of Marthanda Varma paid attention for producing more arms and ammunitions. The strengthening of the Udayagiri fort impregnable and

the fort functioned as a strategic centre and the fort at Puliyoorkurichi fairly known as Udayagiri was the most important military station of the Travancore rulers where Padmanabhapuram was their capital.

Mayyakottai

Mayyakottai is situated in Kalakulam village of Padmanabhapuram Municipality, Kalkulam Taluk. It is 1 km north of Padmanabhapuram and ½ km east of Nagercoil-Kulasekaram road and it is on the way to Kumaracoil from Marunthukottai. At the height of the hillock of 200 feet height, Mayyakottai is constructed. It is a square fort enveloping 1 ½ acres of land. The length of the fort may be 400 feet long. The upper portion of the fort is 3 feet height, built by cutting stones. The lower portion is built by granite stones and is 15 feet high. There are spaces for gun men too. At the centre of the fort there is a pillar 3 feet deep. The situation in which this fort was erected is the same as that for Marunthukottai. It might have been constructed in AD 1744¹⁰. It is said that the place was utilized as burial ground for the dead soldiers and culprits who were hanged to death. When British took the whole land in their hands, this fort lost its importance.

Marunthu kottai

Marunthu Kottai is situated in Kalkulam Taluk, Villavoor Town Panchayat of Kalkulam revenue village. Near the Marunthu Kottai village on the western side there is a mountain of 800 feet height. On the top of the mountain, this Marunthu Kottai fort was constructed. The walls of the fort envelop 200 acres of land and at a length of 500 feet. On the western side the wall was constructed by cutting stones and it is 300 feet high. The basement of the fort was built by De Lannoy's stone and it is about 10 feet high. Inside the fort a vertical rock can be found, on the four corners of the fort there are four Bastions. On the northern side of the fort wall at the centre, there is another Bastion. Near the northern side there is a stone Mandapam and at the south-west side there is a pitch made up of stone structure, 5 feet big and outside of the fort western wall pitch. The stone mandapam has 12 pillars. Its area is 16'10"x11'4". The upper roof is made up of brick and mortar. The mandapam faces east. The height of the pillar is made up of brick and mortar. The mandapam

faces east¹¹. The height of the pillar is 7'6". The entrance to this mandapam is at the north-western corner. The Marunthu Kottai was used for preparing explosives and hence the fort was named after Marunthu Kottai.

Colachel fort

Colachel, a sea coast area, situated at the southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula is a small fishing hamlet of the present Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu. Colachel is situated about twenty two kilometers from the west of Nagercoil and about fifty kilometers South in Trivandrum. Different names are attributed to this place. It was called as 'Colache' by Bartholomew and 'Kolhacy' by Abe Regual. The English, The Dutch, the French and the Danes tried to erect their settlements through the constitution of their forts. The British and the Dutch, the French and the Danes tried to erect their settlements through the construction of their forts. Their attempts ended in vain except that of the British and the Dutch, the British and the Dutch succeeded in the construction of their forts in Colachel.

The British Fort at Colachel

In 1721, Rama Varma succeeded Adithya Varma to the throne of Travancore. When he ascended the throne, the Britishers tried to get his permission to build a fort at Colachel to have a protected sea borne trade. Travancore was having bounteous production of spices. The British who were crazy to have trade in spices with Travancore had the desire to export the spices from Travancore through its natural harbour, Colachel. So they with all sincerity requested Rama Varma to give them permission to build a fort at the Colachel shore. Accordingly Rama Varma also agreed. The total expenses for the construction of the fort were met by Rama Varma from the Travancore exchequer. On 25 April, 1723 an agreement was signed between Rama Varma and the British regarding the construction of a fort at Colachel¹². It was the time when Travancore was distracted by the local chieftains. Rama Varma was also conscious of the fact that if he did not seek an ally his position in Travancore would be endangered by the local chieftains. Marthanda Varma, the nephew

of Rama Varma also suggested that Rama Varma should seek the help of an external force.

A resolution was arrived at by the East India Company. It was sent to the Travancore Raja Rama Varma by Alexander Orme, the local chief of the East India Company on 15th August 1723. On 25th April 1723, a treaty was signed between Alexander Orme, the local chief of the East India Company and Marthanda Varma the nephew of the King Rama Varma. But this treaty Rama Varma agreed to build a fort at Colachel for the British at the cost of the Travancore finance.

The British fort which was constructed for the British by the Travancore ruler Rama Varma did not play any major activities associated with strategic activities because the fort of the British was utilize as a store house of the British. As the British concentrated their attention in the Carnatic they did not any importance to the fort that was built for them by Rama Varma. The remnants of the fort with the ware houses can be seen even today in the western side of the coastal road. Just like the British the Dutch people also tried their best to erect a fort at Colachel.

The Dutch Fort at Colachel

Though Rama Varma, the Maharaja of Travancore built the fort for the British yet they converted the fort into a store house. Hence the opportunity was seized by the Dutch who took earnest steps to build a fort at Colachel. In 1741, the Dutch wanted to have friendly relations with Marthanda Varma, the King of Travancore. They had the desire to attain the ascendancy of the Malabar Coast. But Marthanda Varma refused the Dutch to have any access along any one of the spots in the Malabar Coast. So the Dutch decided to support the enemies of Marthanda Varma. The Dutch Commander Van Imhoff decided to support the princess as ruler of Elayadathuswarupam in difference of the Maharaja. As a reward the princess gave a large army to the Dutch at Ayur three miles from Quilon. The king of Vadakkumar also rewarded the Dutch by granting them a tract of country except a fort. The king of Travancore realized the fact that the leading princess of Malabar had colluded with the Dutch against Travancore.

Marthanda Varma collected an army and defeated the Dutch and captured Elayadathuswarupam. The defeat of the Dutch coupled with disappointment of hopes combined, irritated the Dutch who desired to teach Marthanda Varma, a severe lesson.

The Dutch received fish reinforcements from Ceylon. They secured a place near the port of Colachel, fortified it with stakes and garrisoned it with lack of involvement of soldiers. The responsibility of constructing the fort was shouldered by the Dutch Commander Stein Van Gollennesse. He erected the fort with artillery on its walls. By providing artillery on the walls of the fort it was easy for the Dutch to control the road and safeguard their trade. The fortress was built on the European model with parapets and had to be manned with a garrison of nearly 300 men¹³. Thus the Travancore trade was effectively controlled by the Dutch Stein Van Gollennesse who hoped to induce the Christian fishermen to join them. The Christian fishermen served as coolies for the building of the fortress. The Council of war decided that the fort should be fully garrisoned so as to protect the interest of the Dutch. So on March 3, 1741, the Council of War of the Dutch resolved to construct the fortresses with a bastion made of bricks on the western side.

The forts at Colachel had much difference with the other forts of Nanjil Nadu. Usually forts were built for the protection of the capital. Forts built neither for protection nor for long standing. The fort built by the Travancore King in 1723 for the British and the fort built by the Dutch in 1741 did not serve the purpose in any way. In the battle of Colachel the Dutch were completely defeated and most of them were taken prisoners. Of them two men on whom Marthanda Varma took special notice were Eustatius De Lannoy and Donald, both of Flemish origin. The Maharaja fixed his particular regard on Eustatius De Lannoy. Marthanda Varma selected him as one of his commanders to train the Travancore army on European model.

After the battle of Colachel the forts of the British and the Dutch lost their strategic importance and these forts had been transfigured into prosaic warehouses.

Udachikottai

Udachikottai is situated at Kunnathoor revenue village of Vilavancode Taluk on the Marthandam-Thengapatanam road and it is about 7 kms from Marthandam. Here is the famous Udachikottai. It is a small stone fortification now in ruins, covering the area of five acres of land said that Rani Udachi, the mother of the Famous Thirumalai Nayak of Madurai who invaded Nanjilnadu, is said to have lived in this fort, which was named as Udachikottai after her. Tradition states that Rani Udachi had no issues for a long time and on the advice of her priests, she came to Munchirai from Madurai and worshipped Thirumalaiappan, the deity of the local temple¹⁴. The fort was then built at that time for her stay.

It is said that God blessed her with a child who was named Thirumala. When Thirumalai Nayak became the ruler Madurai, he presented a gold crown and other valuables to this temple.

Thanumalayan Fort

Thanumalayan fort is situated at a place called Pazhaya Pottayadi in the present Kanyakumari district. This fort is 300 years old. The Thanumalayan fort although smaller one compared to many of the gigantic fort of the land, it is filled with great history of a linkage with the early Cheras and the wandering Pandyas of the later period. This is the sites where the Pandya member of Perumal had given asylum to the wandering Marthanda Varma during his hiding, when he escaped from his enemies, the Ettuvittil Pillaimar – Pappu Thampi and Raman Thampi¹⁵. At present it is neglected in history.

Eraniel Palace

An example for the utter negligence, indifference and even stuidity of the local people is the present state of the famous Eraniel palace like the Kanyakumari district. The early history of the Cheras and Pandyas rests with the history of the great perumals of yonder years. They were allowed to be obscure along with the Ay kings. Eraniel palace is a link connecting the dynastical history of these great kingdoms of southern India¹⁶. When the state re-organization took place in the years 1956, this colorful

palace of yonder was handed over to the State of Tamil Nadu, in its unique conditions of splendor and majesty.

The murals of the palace had the top ranking paintings depicting epics and history. The people contained therein a nature cool, stone-cut couch for the kind, with its decorative canopy¹⁷. All have gone to decay. Today the palace is at the verge of total collapse, its tailings, torn beams cut and destroyed by hooligans, tiles with thousands of holes and steps to the story crippled, waiting for its eternal burial.

Conclusion

The forts functioned as centers of protection. These forts were responsible for the enhancement of trade, growth of economic system and serving the progress of the community as a whole. Moreover, it is possible to conclude that considering the massive worth that was involved in the construction of these structures, it would have taken several years for the completion of large forts. The earlier forts would have been one walled, while in subsequent periods they would have made two walled and three walled. While the pattern would have remained the same, improvements would have been effected with the equipment of devices and the addition of towers. In 1809, the forts were not strengthened and maintained properly. Hence it was damaged and the British army under St. Leger entered Travancore. Since then Travancore came under the indirect control of the British. Since then fort in Kanyakumari District have dwindled into archaic. Thus, the minor forts found in Kanyakumari district have played a significant role in the Historical Monuments of the district. This district is also rich in ancient monuments. As some of the

monuments are in deteriorating condition, it is our duty to recommending the administration to recuperate these places. Then only the places will stand for eternally.

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